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ABSTRACT

Although the break-up of the unresponsive school bureaucracy in New York will be a move toward greater accountability, the basic question is: will this raise achievement levels? Its possible advantagees include: the increase in both the operating efficiency of the schools and the responsiveness of schools to the lay public; increased student fate control following from increased parent control; and, the release of creative energies following the synthesis of community and school. The possible dangers include the establishment of a number of small, inefficient bureaucracies, and the abandonment of school integration as a paramount goal. The latter may decrease fate control by emphasizing the child's dependence on his social origins for his educational opportunities. An alternative to both the extreme neighborhood schools policy and the complete integration policy which would preserve and enhance educational quality is typified by the More Effective Schools program. Decentralization must proceed, but a strong central agency will always be needed. (JM)

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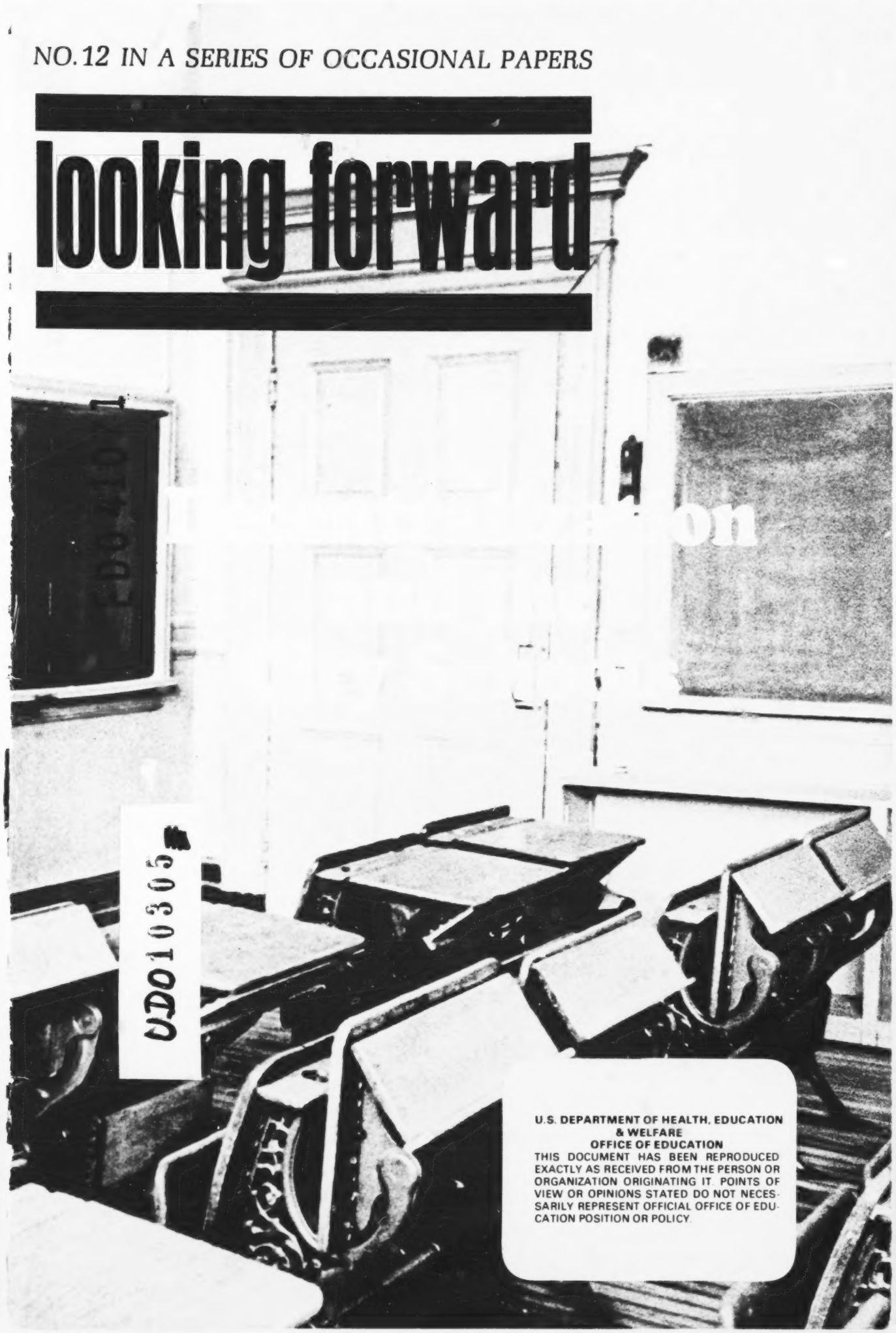
looking forward



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Decentralization and the City Schools

by Sandra Feldman

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Legislation has been proposed for the establishment of 30 to 60 autonomous, competitive school districts in a city whose problems of poverty, discrimination, and ethnic estrangement are among the worst in the nation. The major impetus for the recommendation made by the Mayor's Panel on Decentralization, headed by McGeorge Bundy, was the failure of the school system; the specific nature of those recommendations was shaped by the political climate. The report has come at a time when the struggle for equality, despite a decade of glory, has failed to heal racial division; when, especially among youth in the ghetto, there is an angry and bitter retreat into separatism. Many liberals, weary and disoriented, are willing to settle for "separate but equal" and grasp thankfully at the opportunity to cloak this retrogression in the militant-sounding rhetoric of black power. In the name of reform, private enterprise is offered as a greater healer of social and economic ills than the public sector. The "competitive spirit" is regarded as more constructive than alliances, for in the face of failure and resulting anger, competition is easier, less complicated, than cooperation.

Now, in the name of radical school reform, the Mayor's Panel has written legislation which strengthens segregation and places upon poor communities the burden of creating desperately needed massive, substantive, programmatic changes in their schools.

Yet the ostensible basis for this new proposal is high-minded: the schools in New York City are not educating minority group children. The educational bureaucracy has grown to proportions which make accountability and responsiveness impossible. Decentralization of the system is needed.

But there is a less apparent motivation. The threat of violence in the ghetto is ever-present; the causes are deep-seated and require solutions which neither the city nor the state can really provide. Unable to make a breakthrough in housing or jobs, the Negro community has focused major protest action on the schools, where society's dereliction is painfully, undeniably obvious. And while a total solution to the school problem may be impossible without seriously attacking unemployment and bad housing, it may be possible for protests to be mollified without substantive solutions. It may be — and that's what this discussion is really about — that in giving local communities total control over their schools, society is copping out.

At any rate, the long-needed break-up of the unresponsive school bureaucracy in New York is coming. The move towards greater accountability must be welcomed. But the specific proposals require careful examination. The fundamental question is, how will this upheaval affect the classroom? Will it raise achievement levels?

The Bundy proposal has engendered considerable debate and is likely to be revised. The argument offered here aims to create support for extensive revision which will maximize benefits and minimize dangers. The need for change is indisputable.

Possible Advantages

A proper redistribution of power would increase both the operating efficiency of the schools and their responsiveness to the lay public. Smaller districts run by locally elected boards would better allow education to be tailored to the needs of children in the district. Such a system would give parents real power to affect school program and policy, and this increased power, according to supporters of the Bundy plan for community school districts, would have three major effects:

First, it is claimed, increased parent power in ghetto communities would give the children greater feelings of self-worth and the conviction that they can influence their own destinies; the result would be greater motivation for learning.

Second, the new system would make the professional personnel accountable to the community in which they work — and therefore more responsive to the needs of the children and their parents.

Third, this increased power and the concomitant necessity to compete with neighboring districts would release creative energy and imagination in each community, resulting in a more dynamic and vital educational complex. An analogy with suburban school districts is often made to illustrate this point.

Dangers

While there is some truth in each of these assumptions, the disadvantages are heavy. For example, a careless redistribution of power could decrease efficiency by creating a number of little bureaucracies. More important, we need to re-examine the argument that heightened feelings of self-worth in children depend solely upon increased parental power and involvement. While the theory obviously has some validity, it is asserted by different groups with differing goals in mind. It is used by black power militants who regard decentralization as a step toward self-determination for the Negro community; it is also used by milder proponents of community control, white and black, who have despaired of integration and have begun to favor separatism. Here is Clarence Funnye, former pro-integrationist chairman of New York Core, in a recent piece in the *Village Voice* called, "Bundy and Black Power: A Retreat to Reality;"

"Some will invoke the dream of multi-racial education, saying that schools controlled by ghetto parents will not be 'integrated.' But are they integrated now? Is there any hope that they ever will be? And isn't locally-controlled segregation at least an improvement over the present centrally-controlled (white) quasi-colonial system?"

There is a very real danger that decentralization will mean an end to the possibility of school integration in New York City. Breaking up the school bureaucracy may be a necessity, but balkanizing the system into 30 to 60 autonomous districts drawn along neighborhood lines could be an educational disaster. Any feelings of "control" or self-worth which Negro schoolchildren might acquire in a system controlled by Negroes could be seriously offset by a continuing segregation sanctioned by society.

The Case for Integration

The massive Office of Education Report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity,* authored by James P. Coleman, found that the feeling of having "control over one's fate" — a very shorthand phrase for complicated feelings of adequacy and hope — was an important variable in educational achievement.

Some leaders in the Negro community have maintained that once that community is able to exercise the same power over education that most small white communities have, and once, as a result, there are more black authority figures among the professional personnel for children to emulate, the children's feelings of control over their own lives will be greatly enhanced and achievement will rise.

Arguing for the parents at IS 201 who were fighting for community control and a black principal, Floyd McKissick, National Director of CORE, said:

"The parents knew — perhaps better than the professional educators — that their individual and collective feeling of powerlessness and the resulting lack of self respect had had and would continue to have a crippling effect upon their children. They therefore demanded... black authority figures (e.g., a black principal) with whom their children might be able to identify and to whose position they might aspire."

In that same article, McKissick argues against school integration:

"In fact total reliance on integration is at direct odds with that sense of 'control' over one's fate which, according to the Coleman Report, correlates closely with achievement."

Yet the Coleman Report demonstrates precisely that minority group children in integrated schools have a greater sense of control over their

destinies than minority children in segregated schools; and, even further, that academic achievement among those Negro children in integrated situations is much higher than among Negro children in segregated schools. Coleman saw this as a direct result of the integration itself; that is, being in the integrated situation and having the chance to make his way in the larger world, creates in the child the feeling that obstacles can be overcome by his efforts. It is this that engenders hope and a sense of control over his fate. These are feelings which a ghetto child in segregated schools presumably cannot have because his segregation imprisons him against the opportunity to function in the larger community.

In a summary of his findings in *The Public Interest,* Coleman writes, ". . . The schools are successful only insofar as they reduce the dependence of a child's opportunities upon his social origins."

Can neighborhood schools in a depressed area do this? Will community control and black authority figures make the difference? Not if Coleman is right when he concludes:

> **"It is important to reduce the social and racial homogeneity of the school environment, so that those agents of education that do show some effectiveness – teachers and other students – are not mere replicas of the student himself. In the present organization of schools, it is the neighborhood school that most insures such homogeneity."**

The conclusion that children in segregated schools have seriously damaged feelings of adequacy and control is reinforced by the report of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Racial Isolation in the Public Schools,* which states in part: "Racial isolation not only inflicts educational damage upon Negro students when they are in school, it reinforces the very attitude and behavior that maintain and intensify racial isolation as well."

And the importance of integrated schooling was further demonstrated in the White Plains, New York, experiment, where Negro children in integrated schools showed startling gains in just a few years.

Therefore, while the major gain projected for decentralization is the enlargement of the power and authority of the ghetto parent over his child's education, there is a major danger that extreme decentralization will permanently "lock up" school districts, and that community control of a small ghetto district, assuming no change in the low socioeconomic status of the residents, will lead to even greater feelings of despair and defeat in the schoolchildren.

If the districts created are too numerous and if boundaries are drawn along the "community" lines suggested in the Bundy legislation, defacto segregation will graduate to the level of an accepted institution.

Acceptance of institutionalized segregation is already in the air. We know it is favored by large segments of white society. Even more tragically, it is seized upon by some in the Negro community as a positive benefit. In his endorsement of the Bundy report, Clarence Funnye argues:

> **"Given the existing residential patterns, this means in effect that we are going to recognize a dual school system (which already exists), with real local control. This may hopefully provide for the first time, a mechanism whereby Black superintendents, principals and teachers will educate Black children, and Black parents for the first time will have control over what is taught."**

Obviously, the converse of this is that white superintendents, principals and teachers will educate white children . . . and that black teachers will be kept out of white districts. Of course, many "community control" sympathizers are "morally" opposed to this eventuality. Mr. Bundy himself expresses the hope that it will not happen. But if we have learned anything from the long, unfinished struggle for equality, it is that good will is not enough.

Will segregation in the guise of community control give greater hope to Negro schoolchildren? Not if, as all the serious studies indicate, integration is essential to their achievement. And integration — remember we are speaking of economic class, not simply of race — can be attained in a city as complicated and diverse as New York only by exercising enough central control to achieve a degree of consolidation. Heterogeneity where neighborhoods tend to be homogeneous requires the widening and crossing of school district lines, and the establishment of what is often talked about as decentralization but is really a centralized school structure — the educational park and/or complex.

It ought to be noted that in Chicago an equally radical plan for reorganizing the schools has been developed, and it takes a direction almost completely opposite to the one proposed in New York. The Chicago plan calls for massive busing, campus schools, enlargement and consolidation of districts — all for the purpose of integration as well as school improvement.

In New York, the central school board has lost the confidence of the public — for good reason — and decentralization rather than consolidation is coming. To avoid setting up a permanently segregated system, we must keep the number of districts to less than thirty, and we must draw district lines deliberately to achieve maximum integration as a primary goal.

The Need For Quality

Complete school integration cannot be achieved today or tomorrow in New York City. Maintaining an absolutist position in favor of integration could lead to postponing immediate school improvement.

This trap can and must be avoided. Programs providing much more than "compensation" must be established now. The More Effective Schools Program, for example, is a total school program which radically changes the internal structure of the educational institution by offering individualized instruction through drastically reduced class size and increased numbers of teachers, specialists, clinicians, and special services. MES is not a panacea but it has raised reading achievement, and it has stopped, in the early grades, the progressive academic retardation which is prevalent in ordinary special service schools. Something very much like it is immediately necessary, to help the inner city children who are failing so terribly, and to stop the tidal exodus of white children from the public schools. (In one predominantly Negro More Effective School in Brooklyn, 200 white families bus their children to the school each day — and have done so for three years. Obviously, the school offers an excellent, saturated program.)

The trouble is that local control is regarded as an *alternative* to integration. While most Negroes and liberals agree that integration is best, too many have lost hope of achieving it. Yet integrated schools are not impossible — just very difficult. More difficult than simple decentralization, and more expensive.

There are areas in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx, for example, where neighborhoods are close enough to have integrated schools. In Brooklyn and Queens, some of these areas cross borough lines, and even in Manhattan there are borderline streets where a school could replace a block of tenements and be fed a heterogeneous pupil population. Of course, integrated schools have to be really good — good enough to raise the achievement of poor children, good enough to retain the middle class — and good schools cost a lot of money. (New York City spends approximately $450 per pupil in "special service" elementary schools in disadvantaged areas. MES schools cost approximately $950 per pupil, and that is still not enough.)

The fact is, whether we have decentralization or not, without vast expenditures — for all children, not just the disadvantaged — the public school system will continue to deteriorate. The transfer of power from central to local, or from white to black, will not make the important difference when the power itself is over a starved institution.

Decentralization as a Substitute

Another great danger in the current move toward decentralization is that it can be used as a substitute for real (i.e., budgetary) school improvement. If this kind of substitution is permitted, the schoolchildren in poor communities, whose schools are greatly in need of expensive, concrete improvements, will be the first to suffer and will suffer the most.

Let us look at the "suburban schools" analogy offered by decentralizers, and the probability that the proposed decentralization will see cutthroat competition between autonomous neighborhood districts for scarce money, services, and personnel.

The suburban areas that are looked to as examples of "good schools" because of local control *spend more money*. (Almost all of them have taxing power.) New York City spends approximately $750 per pupil (system-wide) compared to the typical suburban community's $1,100 per pupil. There is no indication whatever that significant sums of money will be provided to upgrade New York City school. If hiring power, for example, is given to the individual districts, and schools in segregated poor communities do not experience a simultaneous material change in conditions, how will they compete for qualified personnel? And further, how will the higher income taxpayers be persuaded that a good share of their taxes must go to separate school districts in low income areas? Will middle-class communities allow public funds to be disproportionately distributed on the basis of greater need to school districts outside of their own?

The Bundy report does provide for a greater allocation of state aid to the schools on the basis of decentralization, and also includes a complicated formula for the distribution of that aid on the basis of need. The report even acknowledges a great need for resources beyond the state allocation.

It ought to be noted, however, that a good part of the increase in state aid will be eaten up by operational costs — including the expense of the initial changeover. According to Bundy, whose estimate is probably conservative, "The net annual cost of decentralization might be very small indeed, or it might in the long run go as high as $50 million or even $100 million a year, depending on the choices of those responsible for the new system." (That same amount could provide for 100 or 200 More Effective Schools.)

As for the acquisition of additional money, there is nothing in the report beyond the enthusiastic recommendation of district-by-district competition for supplementary funds from foundations, the federal government, and other agencies. Instead of an economic program, the

panel relies upon the third major decentralization argument — that power and competition will release creativity and dynamism, and communities will "awaken" to demand what is due them. From a social science point of view, the argument is interesting. From a political point of view, it is disastrous.

One liability of surburban school systems, for example, is the frequently lost battle over increased school taxes. It is very likely that high income taxpayers will resist any increase of taxes for schools in New York City when it is not their schools which need them.

Interestingly enough, the parochialism of the small town outlook has already manifested itself in the calls of some so-called Negro militants for a stop to increased school funds. At the end of last year, the Peoples' Board of Education published an analysis of the school budget, concluding that what is necessary is an end to waste, not increased funds. They wrote:

> **"Unless there is decentralization in which local communities can hold the local schools accountable for how the money is spent, can introduce the local kinds of 'quality control' to make certain that local needs are really being met, it seems wasteful and undesirable to simply increase the education budget. Instead it makes more sense for a detailed decentralization plan, for the entire city, to be drawn up with the local groups involved in the design, so that next year education can receive top priority, and the money won't be wasted in artificial and fake programs."**

The Bundy method of school funding seems designed to keep taxes low and the budget down. It requires community boards to base their proposed budgets "on an estimate by the Central Education Agency of the amount likely to be available in the ensuing fiscal year. . . ." Districts are forced to compete for additional funds from private foundations and city, state, or federal agencies. Instead of this, there must be a sweeping revision of the proposal in the legislature to provide a *guarantee* of substantial supplemental funds for district use.

Just as the call for Black Power without a realistic economic program cannot provide an answer for thousands of Negroes suffering from poverty and joblessness, local control of ghetto schools without a realistic funding program for school improvement cannot end massive academic retardation. Just as Black Power receives support from conservatives because it does not make extensive economic demands on the larger society, local control of schools will receive that support for the same reasons.

"Reconnection"

The Bundy Report is called "Reconnection for Learning." Its basic assumption is that local control will reinstate community confidence in the schools, and improve relations between parents and professionals. It is reasonable to believe this could result, but in at least one demonstration district where a decentralization experiment has been established, the contrary has occurred.

Last year, teachers and parents in Ocean Hill-Brownsville met regularly and, in several instances, demonstrated together for school improvements. They won a few small victories. Because relationships were fairly good there, the area was chosen for experimentation in local control.

Now schools which were overcrowded, understaffed, severely lacking in special services, and sorely in need of renovation for years are under control of the community. They are still overcrowded, more understaffed than ever before, completely lacking in services, still in need of renovation, and handicapped even further by an atmosphere of tension and hostility which has driven a wedge between the teachers and the community.

Rather than the "reconnection" of community and school which the Bundy Report talks about, there has been a widening of the gap. There is increased blame-placing on both sides for poor learning conditions, and there is greater tension as parents and teachers, each from separate vantage points, see radical changes in procedure unaccompanied by substantive change in educational assets.

Although racial overtones intensify the conflict, the cause of the basic tension is unmistakable: academic failure. Teachers, losing confidence, beset by difficulties, and unable to make a significant dent in the retardation, blame the parents for not preparing their children for school. The community, which elected a governing board, which hired their own superintendent and principals, is discouraged and angry and blames the teachers.

Unfortunately, the greater accountability desired by the community (the second argument for decentralization) cannot be realized by severe criticism or even discharge of professionals: there must be a rise in achievement, and teachers alone, without a substantial increase in services and personnel, cannot provide it — not even under threat of dismissal.

The attitudes of parents and teachers toward each other in the decentralization experiments should be compared with those of parents and teachers of children in More Effective Schools, where services and personnel are abundant. MES has served to "reconnect" as no other

program has. With MES the community and the school are convinced, by the tangible evidence of achievement and available services, that society has — in that instance at least — placed a high value on the education of their children. Will poor communities left to their own devices without adequate funds be able to accomplish this?

The Danger of "Disconnecting"

There is certainly the danger that local control will become an expression of the narrow parochial interests of certain groups in each area, to the detriment of the needs of the public generally. Care must be taken to see that decentralization is an expansion, not a shrinkage, of democracy.

With districts competing for supplemental funds as well as for personnel, there is a danger of intensifying conflict. Herman Badillo, Bronx Borough President, was adamant in his criticism of this kind of competition in a society where class and ethnic lines are firmly drawn. "We will see more civil strife than ever before," he declared. Indeed, besides the losing battle the poor communities will wage with their middle-class neighbors, there will be wars within the already divided and sub-divided minority communities. Local boards with the power to dispense funds and create jobs will have to be exceptionally high-minded to avoid creating little political clubhouses out of each school district — especially with the Mayor appointing 5 out of 11 members on every school board. There will certainly be more "Mayor Power" in these areas than "little city halls" could create. There could also be real power for irresponsible extremist elements — right or left, white or black — that would not otherwise be able to attain such influence.

It must be understood further that along with the acquisition of power, there will be, for the Mayor, a simultaneous dispersal of his responsibility for the success or failure of education.

The onus will be on the local boards to produce academic success. Then, according to the *New York Times* editorial writers and other cynics, they will have no one but themselves to blame for failure.

Cynicism of that sort is a "moderate" backlash reaction to the blunt anger of black power types who are among the most vocal leaders in the school fight. It is eerily compatible with the guilty reaction of some liberals to that same anger — a patronizing willingness to support separation because to do so is less painful than to argue against Negro bitterness for something which seems lost forever anyway.

Destroying an archaic, ineffective school hierarchy doesn't have to mean a balkanized, segregated system. We need change, but we need change for the better.

Conclusions

Decentralization will certainly be a part of the solution to the school crisis, provided it is not substituted for resources, provided competition is minimized and funds are maximized, provided enough central control is maintained to prevent districts from locking each other out and provided district lines are drawn to assure that inroads toward integration can be made. The positive aspects are obvious: greater community involvement, less bureaucracy, more accountability. But these advantages will not in themselves ensure greater learning achievement. To do that, whatever form decentralization takes, a coalition of parents, liberals, teachers and other trade unionists must wage an all-out fight for increased funds for education. Only the federal government can provide the kind of resources needed, and only a massive coalition of forces can prod Congress into action. To the extent that an ascendent separatist point of view prevents groups in the Negro community from coalescing with white allies to demand increased federal aid to schools, and to the extent that the white community uses black extremism as an excuse to turn its back, the children, white and black, will suffer.

Some Guidelines

In any decentralization scheme, we must maintain a city-wide Board of Education which retains considerable powers, including the licensing and appointment of teachers. Professionals must be hired on an objective basis so that, for example, Negro teachers cannot be turned away from schools in white areas and white teachers from schools in Negro areas. Also, appointments must continue to be made equitably where vacancies exist, especially while the teacher shortage lasts. If communities have the power to hire teachers as has been proposed, then, conversely, teachers will have the power to choose where to work. As we have already said, without immediate and radical changes in the conditions of schools in poor areas, these schools will not be able to compete for teachers — white or black.

The city-wide board should set city-wide educational policy and enforce standards, to ensure equal educational opportunity. It should contract for independent expert evaluative services and should function as the clearing-house for evaluative information, which would include district by district comparisons of pupil performance. It should have jurisdiction over zoning and site selection, to ensure equal allocations of new buildings and the construction of schools in borderline areas where integration may be possible. The city-wide board should also have power to bring charges against any local authority, lay or profes-

sional, for severe violation of moral, legal and educational ethics.

Beyond the powers of the central agency, the powers of laymen and professionals on the local level must be clearly defined to preserve the integrity of the schools.

The decision-making power of the community should reside primarily in their lay board's control over the district superintendent, whom they should hire and have the right to fire.

Moreover, the local board should have enough leeway to mandate particular broad curriculum emphases within the prescribed policy and standards set by the city-wide board. They should also have authority over supplemental funds for special programs they deem necessary for the particular needs of their district. They should be able to contract independent educational expertise for help in the development of these programs, and they should be empowered to commission outside agencies for evaluation and studies.

Professionals should retain jurisdiction over matters of professional personnel, including rating, hiring and firing of teachers. A district superintendent who does not weed out incompetent teachers would himself be uprooted by the local board.

Recourse to an impartial third party, for both the parent and the teacher, could be worked out in the event of conflict. The establishment of an *ombudsman* or similar vehicle for the review of parental complaints against professionals, and of professional complaints against the lay board, would be extremely valuable.

Also, within the policy mandated by the state, city, and local boards, teachers—not parents—must have the power to construct and organize courses of study, and to determine methodology and texts.

The sharing by parents and teachers of a wide range of advisory powers with regard to school program and policy would be beneficial and could be worked out in each school or district, or both.

Whatever form the decentralization of the school system takes, honest and sturdy cooperation between teachers and parents must be a primary goal, along with the preservation of democracy and equal educational opportunity for all.

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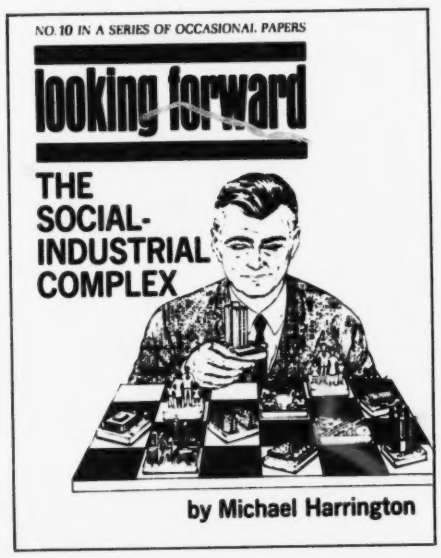

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